

Fisher was the man who built the Speedway

IT'S A PRETTY SAFE BET THERE NEVER would have been an Indianapolis 500 had there not first been Carl G. Fisher.

Fisher was a race car driver, and before cars existed he raced bicycles.

He grew up poor and quit school at age 12 to help support his family. Bicycles were hugely popular in the 1890s and Fisher opened a repair shop in downtown Indianapolis when he was still a teenager. To promote it, he once rode a bicycle across a tightrope between two Downtown buildings.

When the automobile came along, Fisher fell in love. Despite bad eyesight, he raced on dirt tracks across the Midwest, and converted his bicycle shop to sell Stoddard-Dayton cars.

Rarely at a loss for an attention-getting promotional idea, Fisher tried all manner of stunts to attract potential customers. In 1908, he attached a Stoddard-Dayton to a hot air balloon and waved from it as the balloon carried the car over Indianapolis for all to see.

That evening he drove back into town in what seemed to be, but was not, the same car. He'd taken the engine out of the first one to make it lighter, and during the flight his brother followed below, driving the second car.

Fisher made some money selling cars, but he made his fortune selling car parts—specifically headlights. Cars still were started by a hand-crank, so there was not yet a battery to power lights. With his friend James Allison, Fisher bought into an invention for gas-powered headlights.

Their Prest-O-Lite company became a huge success, but materials used to make the product were so volatile the company's factories frequently blew up, damaging neighboring buildings. The main Indianapolis facility blew up so many times the city council passed an ordinance barring the manufacture of Prest-O-Lite products within the city limits.

When the car battery was invented, Prest-O-Lite bought into the new technology. It became a much safer place to work, and Fisher and Allison kept making money.

Automobile technology was advancing almost daily at hundreds of little car-making companies across the country, but most roads were so bad the cars couldn't safely go as fast as the speeds they were capable of achieving.

So Fisher's idea was to build a big racetrack where carmakers could put their machines to the test. He talked a few friends, including Allison, into investing, and bought some farmland just north of town. Although he did mean what he'd said about the value of automotive testing, Fisher also wanted an excuse to race cars. And he wanted lots of people to buy tickets to see it.

The first auto race at the new Indianapolis Motor Speedway was in 1909, but there were several fatal accidents on the gravel roadway, so Fisher soon had it paved with bricks.

In 1910, the speedway hosted auto races and aviation events. The Wright brothers flew there that year. These were big events attended by thousands, but they didn't quite satisfy Fisher. They weren't big enough. They didn't have sufficient... spectacle. And then Carl Fisher had another idea.

—Michael Jesse (2011)

RIGHT: The first auto races at the Speedway were held on Aug. 19, 1909. Louis Schwitzer won the first event, a five-mile sprint, but several other drivers crashed because of the roughness of the track. That prompted Carl Fisher to have it rebuilt with bricks. —Charles F. Bretzman/The Indianapolis News



AUTO MEET PLANNED
DECORATION DAY RACE
Movement on Foot to Bring B Drivers of the Country to Indianapolis May 30.

The big auto race meet is scheduled for Decoration Day at the Fair Grounds and Carl G. Fisher yesterday closed arrangements with Barney Oldfield, the prominent driver of the country, to appear in this city on that day and take part in the annual event and also make an effort to set a record for a mile.

CARL FISHER WEDS; GIVES FRIENDS BIG SURPRISE
Automobilist and Aeronaut Marries Miss Jane Watts After Exciting Automobile Ride.

After several exciting automobile races around the city, made more so by the fact that Carl Fisher, an automobilist and aeronaut, was the driver of the car, he yesterday married Miss Jane Watts, a daughter of Mr. North Capitol, at 11:30 o'clock, at the home of the bride's mother, Mrs. Neil McPherson.

Carl Fisher, the well-known driver of this city, has become the owner of an airplane, purchased last week from the Indianapolis Aeroplane Company.

On a Quiet Afternoon Back In 1909
INDIANAPOLIS MOTOR SPEEDWAY COMPANY.

Four of the construction gang which built the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909. Short races were held there in 1908 and 1911, and the first 500-mile race in 1911. At left is Frank Richards, motor coach, and second from right is William A. Wood, field engineer. Unfortunately, names of the other two men are not known.

The news of his purchase of an airplane came as a surprise to all of his friends in this city, as when he left here he had no intention of making such a purchase, or if he did he kept it to himself and refused to allow any one in on the secret.

CARL FISHER NOW OWNS AN AIR SHIP
Local Automobile Dealer Buys a Flying Machine at Madison Square Garden Show.

AERIAL BALLOON COSTS \$3,000
Well-Known Racer Will Not After New Records.

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PRICE TWO CENTS
CARL FISHER TELLS STORY OF SKY RACE
Says Farmers Began Target Practice Soon After Gas Bag Sailed Over Brown County.

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